

1 Introduction

This is the third and last sermon in this series on Faith and Action. It is certainly not the last word on the subject. In the first sermon we looked at the relationship between saving faith and the works or actions that authenticate such faith.

2 We looked at the Hebrew word *emunah* אֱמוּנָה and saw how it related to steadiness rather than brief moments of spiritual ecstasy.

We saw that faith takes us beyond the things we can conceptualise and understand. Finally we looked at the statements by Paul and James to see not a contradiction but a complementarity which combines faith and action.

The combined teaching can be summed up in the statements:

3 “*Not faith plus works but faith that works.*”

4 “*Faith alone saves but the faith that saves is not alone*”

5 In the last sermon we looked at how the Apostle Paul and James dealt with the statement that Abraham's faith was “*accounted it to him for righteousness.*” We saw how there was no contradiction between the two Apostles.

6 In this sermon I want to look first, at the transforming effect that faith has on our perception of life and the world around us, and second, at the need to transform our faith.

7 Faith That Transforms

There has been a tendency in modern Christianity confuse the object of our faith. We even have a “faith” movement in the church which talks about “having faith in your faith.” – the title of one of Kenneth Hagin's books. This view of faith has a lot more to do with secular ideas about the power of the mind than it has to do with the Bible.

8 The object of our faith is God and Him alone. Our faith is informed by the Scriptures and strengthened by use.

9 Our faith is a gift from God – He is the initiator of faith. This is well illustrated by the confession of faith by Peter in the Synoptic gospels. When Peter says to Jesus, “You are the Messiah of God (the Messiah God “*atta Moshiaich El*”) Jesus responds 10 “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17). Peter's understanding of Jesus' identity was transformed by faith and that faith was from God Himself.

There is another personality who appears in all the Synoptic Gospels whose view of Jesus is transformed. It is Jesus' executioner, the centurion at the foot of the cross. It is worth knowing a little about this man and his profession before we look at the text.

11 The Romans were not noted for being particularly compassionate. They ruled their dominions by brute force and terror. Crucifixion was a common form of execution besides other appalling forms of punishment as well. Those who were conquered by the Romans were usually dealt a devastating blow. They didn't come in, defeat the rulers and set up an interim government. They came in and they suppressed you.

The backbone of Roman power was the Roman army, and it was the Roman centurions - officers who were in charge of groups of 100 men - that were responsible for making sure that power was executed in true Roman fashion. At a local level throughout Israel it was the centurions who would have administered the laws of occupation. It stands to reason therefore that they would have been the focus of ordinary people's hatred.

We are introduced to four centurions in the New Testament. This is probably because they were the exceptions to the rule as far as centurions were concerned. The first is in **Luke 7:2-12** the centurion who loved the nation of Israel and had built the local synagogue. Not your average centurion I'm sure that you will agree. There are two centurions mentioned in the Book of Acts (Cornelius and the unnamed centurion who escorted Paul to Rome) but the other centurion I want look at is the one who actually crucified Jesus.

The centurion at the foot of the cross is behaving a little more true to form. He is the man who oversees Jesus' crucifixion. Now, it is likely that his day began as a routine day for him. Another day another crucifixion... No doubt he was a bit startled by Jesus' prayer which He kept repeating (the Greek is in the present continuous tense) "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." (**Luke 23:34**) There was none of the usual cursing or pleading but instead a prayer for his well being. A little disconcerting when you are crucifying someone I would imagine.

Then there is the earthquake, the darkness and the manner in which Jesus surrenders Himself to the Father and gives up His spirit. Mark brings his gospel to a climax as he states, **12** "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" **Mark 15:39**

What happened to this centurion executioner? He was transformed by faith. He saw the world and the reality of his situation through new eyes. Jesus was no longer one more hapless victim of Roman brutality He was the Son of God. This is the faith that transforms.

13 So Paul writes, "And do not be conformed to this world, but ***be transformed by the renewing of your mind***, so that you may prove ***what the will of God is***, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

Why are our minds renewed? To prove what the will of God is – in other words faith is always focused on serving God – as a servant watches his master for the next instruction so we keep our eyes fixed on Him to hear and obey His next command. That is the character of faith

14 Micah 6:8

He has told you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?

15 Habakkuk 2:4

But the righteous will live by his faith.

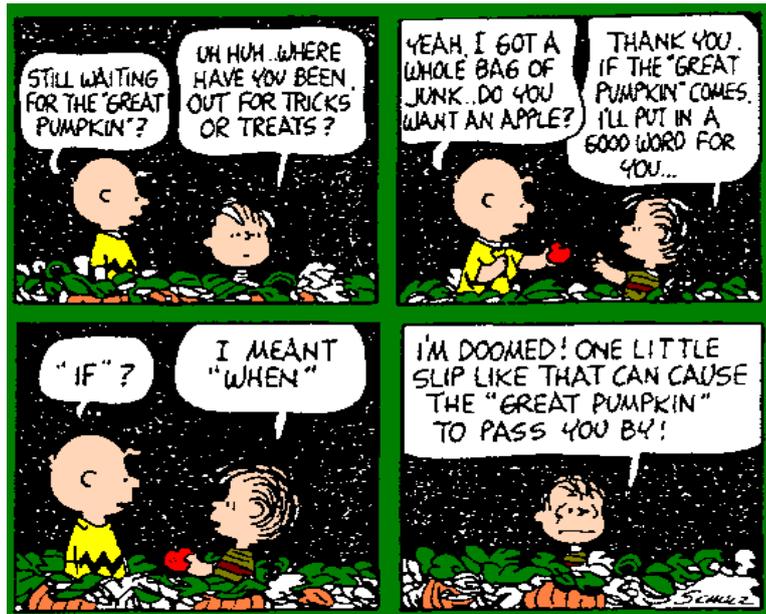
In these Scriptures the biblical concept of faith is encapsulated. Not as power- filled humans who call the shots with God but those whose will is bowed before their Maker and who seek to serve Him with their lives. This is the faith that saves.

16 Transformed Faith

For many people their faith has to be transformed when they become a disciple of Jesus Christ. I said in the first sermon in this series that everyone has faith of some kind. When someone becomes a Christian the faith that they had in themselves, or astrology, or positive thinking or whatever... has to be transformed as well. You cannot take the principles of these kinds of faith and apply them to a disciple relationship with Jesus. They don't fit.

Why don't they fit? They don't fit because they tend to be formulaic. "When the Moon is in the seventh house, and Jupiter aligns with Mars," so the song goes, "then peace will guide the planet and love will steer the stars." It's all about formulas. If you want to understand how inappropriate this kind of cause and effect faith is for a relationship then think about this. Its like the man who says to himself, "I can get away with cheating on my wife – all I need to do is to buy her flowers that will make her happy again." Right? – Wrong! Cause and effect does not rule relationships nearly as much as trust and good faith does.

17 Charlie Brown explains this formulaic faith very well.



Linus' belief in the "The Great Pumpkin" is dependent upon saying the right thing and avoiding one little slip like saying "if" instead of "when". This is what differentiates Biblical faith from superstition. Superstition is based on a desire to control and use God; while faith is based on a desire to let God control you.

18 Superstitious faith is the kind of faith the demons have (**James 2:19**). Rather than believing in and fully trusting an all-powerful, all-loving supreme Person, superstitious people believe in a God who can be controlled if they learn which strings to pull or buttons to press. They assume that their human intellect can outsmart the will of God, in the same way that we have learned to make electricity our servant. Their faith is in their ability to control the force.

19 You may think that all this sounds very far from Christianity. However Christians are not immune from superstition. Here are some popular examples, some of which are going to trouble you.

1. Pleading the blood of Jesus over a person or an object to keep them safe.
2. Using fasting to get God to answer a prayer request – this is not fasting, it's a hunger strike!

3. Using prayer chains in the belief that the more prayers that are prayed and the more people that are praying the greater your chance of wresting God into conforming with your desires.
4. Praying using the name of Jesus – one prosperity gospel preacher said that Jesus' Name is God's power of attorney – if you pray in Jesus' Name God is legally bound to grant your request. This is a transgression of the commandment, "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

We are quite capable of ascribing a kind of magical power to all sorts of things. We do this with certain practices or objects, like communion or crosses. Reliance on such power, rather than on trust in God, constitutes an offense against the honour due to God alone, as required by the first commandment.

20 The fundamental issue is whether what we are doing is an attempt to control God. Biblical faith on the other hand is demonstrated by perfectly by Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane He prayed (**Matthew 26:39**)

- 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."
- 39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. **Yet not as I will, but as you will.**"
- 40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter.
- 41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."
- 42 He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, **may your will be done.**"
- 43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.
- 44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, **saying the same thing.**

The litmus test for faith is the question, "Whose will are you seeking in your life?" If you can honestly answer "God's will" then you have a faith that has been transformed. If on the other hand you find yourself trying to manipulate God by so-called faith actions such as "abiding" or "declaring" you would do well to turn back to God in submission and repentance so that the Father child relationship can be re-established.

We all need to take stock from time to time. We so easily fall into a manipulative mode in our relationship with God. We re-establish true faith by submission to the will of God who loves us and redeems us.